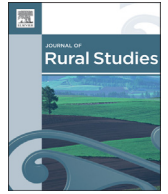




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# Rethinking the connections between agricultural change and rural prosperity: A discussion of insights derived from case studies in seven countries

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## ABSTRACT

In the past, rural prosperity has been mainly associated with the modernisation of agriculture and the economic benefits that appear to originate from it. Today we know that this simple logic is not correct in several respects. Regionally, structural changes to farms and the modernisation of a few farms have not always contributed to prosperous rural areas. At the level of farm households, we can see that other non-economic aspects such as a minimum level of autonomy, social recognition and social and environmental well-being all play rather significant roles. In this paper, we present an empirically grounded analysis of these questions based on in-depth case studies in seven countries (Spain, Italy, Lithuania, Latvia, Israel, Germany and Denmark). We discuss rural actors understanding of rural prosperity in different countries and contexts, the strategies used to improve prosperity and well-being, and how these strategies can be enabled and fostered. The empirical evidence presented indicates that prosperity in rural contexts is increasingly understood as being multi-dimensional and that people seek to balance economic parameters with human, social and environmental well-being.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. From simple income parameters to a new understanding of well-being

The term prosperity has long been associated mainly with economic aspects. According to the Oxford Dictionary, prosperity is “the state of being successful, especially in making money” and its key synonym is ‘affluence’. Kasser et al. (2007) defined prosperity as the

“capacity to generate economic growth through consumption”. This economic interpretation of prosperity has been influenced by the ideal of indefinite progress (Friedmann, 1987) based on the belief of the unlimited availability of natural resources and the promotion of consumption in modern societies. The promotion of consumption, in particular, has been linked to the economic interpretation of development in previous decades (Wolf, 1981) and remains a dominating paradigm still in the present day (Jackson, 2009).

However, since the 1970s, alternative definitions and measures of prosperity and progress have been developed that are more in line with the Latin origin of the term (Jackson, 2009; Stiglitz et al., 2009), meaning “doing well”, “according to expectation” or “according to one’s hope”. Simultaneously, there is an increasing consensus that growth in output does not accurately represent growth in human welfare. The use of Gross Domestic Product

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(GDP), in particular, fails as a key indicator of prosperity, as it does not account for non-market services, negative externalities and changes in the asset base as well as the non-market dimensions of well-being (Stiglitz et al., 2009). Jackson (2009) in his book *Prosperity without growth: Economics for a finite planet* makes explicit the connections between consumption, growth, inequality and the rapid depletion of resources as well as the fact that the increasing levels of consumption do not make people happier once a certain point has been exceeded. This echoes with earlier work by Sen (1984) who emphasised that “*more is not always better*” and that prosperity can also be seen as the capability (or freedom to) function in a context (Sardar, 2007; Rapp, 2008).

As the predominantly economic, materialistic interpretation of prosperity and idea of indefinite progress failed (Toynbee, 1987; Stiglitz et al., 2009), other approaches ascend which integrate social and environmental aspects of prosperity. These new multidimensional approaches claim to focus more on increasing the quality of lives (qualitative development) instead of the amount of production and consumption (quantitative growth) (Daly, 2008). The basic idea is to provide an environment where people flourish, while at the same time ensuring social cohesion and well-being, and living in ecologically sustainable ways (SDC, 2003, 2009; Wall, 2008; Cazorla et al., 2013).

These new developments in conceptualizing prosperity encouraged attempts to measure prosperity in ways that recognise the multidimensionality of the concept (Chambers, 1997; Anand et al., 2005; Neff, 2007). Studies so far tended to account for the socio-cultural aspects of people's life, such as psychological well-being, freedom of choice, opportunities and social capital (Stiglitz et al., 2009; van der Ploeg et al., 2008; Sen, 1984; Nardone et al., 2010) as well as environmental aspects such as responsible resource use and environmental conservation (Jackson, 2009; Diener et al., 1993; Daly, 2008). This paper presents an application of this new multidimensional approach to prosperity to agricultural and rural contexts. Our particular interest is in the perceptions of prosperity of farmers and other people who live in rural areas.

### 1.2. What does this new understanding mean for rural areas?

For rural areas, the new understanding of prosperity might well imply that economic efficiency at farm level is not necessarily contributing to economic growth at regional level, and that both might not even be suitable indicators for measuring the prosperity and well-being of farmers and others in rural areas. The new understanding puts into particular question those strategies that have driven farm modernisation since the 1960s. Large specialised and capital-intensive farms in search of efficiency and competitiveness, are less and less the unquestioned ideal. Other strategies such as a greater diversification of farming systems or organic farming involve different and broader values that can contribute to enhancing prosperity. More diverse farms, for example, are in many regions connected with valued cultural landscapes and mosaic-like field structures, that have an emotional or aesthetic value for the region's residents; and sometimes also with lower farming intensities and the use of high-nature-value farming systems (Knickel, 1990; Murdoch and Pratt, 1993; Philo, 1992, 1993; Cloke et al., 1995; Shucksmith and Rønningen, 2011). Shucksmith and Rønningen (2011) point out that non-conventional farms might provide a base for rural households to sustain their livelihoods through pluriactivity, retaining populations in areas from which they would surely have been lost if farm amalgamation had proceeded. Bryden et al. (1993, 2011) and Knickel et al. (2011) point to

the provision of rural amenities and their transformation in the rural economy, and the importance of this in fostering vibrant rural communities. These findings on alternative farming strategies and systems are not being reflected in rural policy (Darnhofer et al., 2014b). Indeed, agricultural policy is often still geared towards an ideal of highly commercial full-time farms, treating other types of farms and strategies as obstacles to productivist agriculture (Van der Ploeg et al., 2008, 2009; Dwyer et al., 2012; Knickel, 2016).

Of course, this does not mean that large-specialised farms do not have a role to play in rural prosperity. There is, however, an urging need to revisit the particular potentials and added value of alternative farming strategies and practices as well as the newly emerging agri-food networks that serve as platforms where farmers and consumers innovate and seek alternative development models. Darnhofer et al. (2014b), Long (2000) and others see such initiatives as laboratories for social change, thus, redefining what prosperity in rural areas implies.

The starting point for our analysis is that prosperity in rural areas acquires special characteristics that are much related to people's way of life and the context in which they are embedded. These special characteristics have been discussed by many different authors (Milbourne, 1997; Cresswell, 1996; Halfacree, 1993; Sibley, 1995; Van der Ploeg et al., 2008; De los Ríos et al., 2016a,b). Some authors argue that prosperity in rural areas should include factors such as social cohesion and engagement, achieved through cooperation and trust; environmental sustainability, which is considered one of the most important elements through which income may be generated in these areas; knowledge, which increases the ability rural people have to increase their resilience; and quality of life (Dayton-Johnson, 2001; Easterly et al., 2006; Benz and Meincke, 2007). Van der Ploeg et al. (2008) link quality of life with a social life characterised by networks, shared norms and expectations that promote interactions and create a “*sense of community*”. Aspects such as health, self-control, family well-being, personal satisfaction, community values and maintaining culture and tradition are also closely subsumed within what farmers consider quality of life to be.

### 1.3. Research questions

For all of the above, and taking into account that a consensual definition of rural prosperity and well-being does not yet exist, the three main research questions we will address in this paper are the following:

- (1) How do rural actors understand rural prosperity? Which dimensions of rural prosperity, and well-being, are important for them?
- (2) What strategies do rural actors and communities use to improve their prosperity and well-being?
- (3) How can these strategies be enabled/fostered?

A more balanced socio-economic development of European regions and, in particular, more prosperous rural areas, is high on the political agenda (United Nations, 2016). We believe that the above research questions and related exploratory analysis can inform the identification of the different dimensions that ought to be taken into account when addressing prosperity in rural areas, and when developing associated policies.

## 2. Empirical basis of this paper and methodology

We base our analysis on seven case studies carried out in the

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